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Toddlers Watching TV

*A study on the role of electronic media in the everyday-lives
of one to three year old children*

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Abstract

In recent studies on children and electronic media, children are acknowledged as active users, interpreting TV-texts in various meaningful ways, according to their previously constructed knowledge of narratives and relating the texts to their everyday lives. Still, there is a tendency that toddlers' (ages 1 to 3) viewing is neglected, and seen as mere fascinations of patterns, bright colours and movements without focusing on the social uses or uses in which television narratives come to play an important part in small children's experimenting with building identity and self-image. This article focuses on the meaning-making processes that take place when toddlers watch television and DVD, and the way in which they broaden the reception-situation to different arenas, for instance through play and different uses of merchandise connected to the television programs. Also, it studies the context of children's media use, the way both parents, media and market set up the frames of children's reception.

1. Introduction

When asked his name a two and a half year old boy consequently replied: «My name is Laurits Bob the Builder.» Just like that, as if it was a well-established fact, not up for further discussion. This boy loved the characters from the British television concept so much that he even slept with figures picturing the machines from the show at night. In doing that, he showed how much this simple story of a construction worker and his range of anthropomorphized machines can matter for a little boy. This was not a question of mere fascination of bright colours, movements and music – this was a meaningful part of his everyday life and of his way of dealing with it.

In recent studies on children and electronic media, children are acknowledged as active users, interpreting TV-texts in various meaningful ways, according to their previously constructed knowledge of narratives, style and genre and to their cognitive schemata. Still, many studies apply an adult perspective to their analysis of children's reception, emphasizing for instance correct (or less correct) ways of distinguishing between fantasy and reality as well as learning of academic skills and pro-social behaviour from television, and often emphasizing positive effects of viewing. In doing that, these studies apply a traditional view on reception and effect, which is in most cases left behind in studies on adults and older children

(Valkenburg 2004, Lemish 1987, Lemish/Tidhar 1999, Fisch 2005). Also studies of particular shows like *Teletubbies* or *Sesame Street* have been conducted since the 1970's (Lemish/Tidar 2001, Fisch 2005, Briggs 2006). A large British survey on children under the age of six (Marsh 2005) support some of the findings of this study, but also with extended emphasis on development of media literacy based on responses from parents and caretakers and not focusing on children's own point of view. The Nordic tradition of media studies and studies of children's culture have for many years applied a cultural perspective to the study of children's media use; still there is a tendency that toddlers' viewing is neglected, and seen as mere fascinations of patterns, bright colours and movements (Hake, 1998) without focusing on the social uses or uses as the above-mentioned, in which television narratives come to play an important part in a little boy's experimenting with building identity and self-image. In these cases the earliest television experiences are regarded less sophisticated and nuanced than those of older children and adults.

This ignoring of toddlers as television viewers is just one of many fields in which children under the age of three has been seen as not important and in which their competencies have been under-estimated (Løkken, 2004). In my research on young children's first meeting with electronic media, I have as a main thesis that children are constituted as television viewers during early childhood and that they, at this early age, develop preferences for specific genres, programs or concepts. Obviously, this age period is characterized by huge developments; cognitive, linguistic, bodily and socially, in which television texts plays an important role in providing narratives and other forms of raw-material. Still, the aim of this study is not focused on the possible educational effects of television viewing. What I am interested in, is the meaning-making processes that take place when children watch television and video, and the way in which they broaden the reception-situation to different arenas, for instance through play and different uses of merchandise connected to the television programs, as well as the social and cultural context of the child's media use.

2. The view on children

There are at least two possible explanations to the lack of studies on young children and media; one considering what might seem infeasible methodological challenges, and one considering a more common-sense view of toddlers as someone who should not be watching TV or video, not to mention making demands or having wishes, which would constitute them as consumers. These two questions are closely linked to each other and are deeply funded in a long-term discussion of children as being competent or in-competent, active or passive recipients, citizens or consumers.

In my study I take this discussion into consideration, taking my point of departure in what has been called «the new view on children» or «the new paradigm of childhood» (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). I find it important to let this understanding of children as agents in their own life, not just objects of socialization, encompass also the youngest children. This means considering them active participants in society and also considering the specific circumstances of life, that they live with and under, as well as their specific ways of dealing with this world, where bodily expressions and interpretations play an important role.

Also it demands openness to research-traditions different from traditional reception-analysis and in-depth interviews. In this case, I have been inspired by mainly ethnographical and anthropological work considering children in different everyday-life settings. Understanding even the youngest children as media users requires a theoretical perspective which incorporates the different spheres in which meaning making and identity building in relation to media take place. In this case a broad ethnographic perspective is suitable for understanding the processes in which children involve themselves, which not only take place between an individual child and a specific media text, but which is integrated in numerous interactions between children, relatives, texts and artifacts. One approach in this direction is outlined by George Marcus (1997) labeled multi-sited ethnography. Marcus argues towards cross-cutting dichotomies such as local/global or lifeworld/system and sees the approach as a «*response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformational locations of cultural productions*» (Marcus, 1997: 97). In this case I apply one of Marcus' five so-called modes of construction¹ in my aim to follow media texts in different modes and contexts; «Follow the Thing», in order to discover how children integrate media and their modes of expression in different aspects of their everyday lives. In this study, my research method can be said to be placed between the two often quite separated traditions; reception analysis and media ethnography.

Still, the methodological circumstances might not be the only answer to the question. The ideal picture that we have of toddlers, which does not include children as consumers, might also have something to do with it. My point here is that children, even the youngest of them, are consumers, whether we like or not, and there is a huge industry providing them with all kinds of toys, television programs, clothes, merchandise and food, and that it must be the aim of research to describe and analyse this; not judging whether it is good or bad.

3. Television and merchandise

My research seeks to understand how media use take place in interplay with structures such as the family, the texts as structures and consumer culture as

¹ Marcus names these «Follow the People», «Follow the Thing», «Follow the Metaphor», «Follow the Life or Biography» and «Follow the Conflict».

such, applying a child perspective to my research. Most of the shows which are broadcasted or sold to children today are in some or several ways connected to a whole range of merchandise: toys, picture books, CDs, video cassettes and DVDs, computer games, cereals, clothing etc. etc. Even the programs distributed by the traditional public service channels in for instance Scandinavia and the UK² are loaded with merchandise, and most kids have one or more of these items in their bedrooms, even at very early ages. It is therefore impossible to understand children as television viewers and users of television narratives without including a discussion of children as consumers.

This is originated in two theses. One has to do with the way children actually use these merchandise products, and expand their reception and meaning making to different modalities and materializations of the specific narrative. This is documented by Günther Kress (1997), who analyses the way children make use of for instance paper, drawing, cutting, building and constructing with Lego blocks (or with «what is at hand»), «writings» and a lot of other stuff, which each in its own provide different possibilities for expression and understanding, and all have different semiotic potentials. Kress is concerned with children's paths to traditional literacies (learning how to read and write), but I understand this conception of children as a fundamental part of their being and acting in the world, and a way of dealing also with developing skills and knowledge of media and their modes of expression. Building on Kress' theories I therefore suggest that reception of television narratives must be seen in a wider context, which also includes media-related play, and uses of different media products.

The second thesis can be said to be a consequence of the first, since not only do children play with and have as their disposals all these things, but this fact in itself constitute them as a quite considerable consumer-segment – even before they are born. This implies that toddlers are – from a commercial point of view – considered a lucrative audience, just as valid as consumers, as any other individual who is willing to pay for a given product or service (Olesen, 2003). And although toddlers might rarely have disposal of their own money, adults (parents and other relatives) surrounding them are willing to compensate for that³. Therefore I find it of importance to describe and try to understand the processes of consumption and media-use considering this particular age-group, which is not even included in official statistics of television-viewing⁴, which is why qualitative approaches must be applied to get

² For instance the before mentioned Bob the Builder character or Teletubbies, which are both originated from BBC.

³ In Denmark, a very popular gift for baby-showers or christenings has for the last decade or so been hand-puppets of the two Denmark's Radio-characters Kaj and Andrea – a frog and a parrot which has been on television for more than 30 years, and therefore of course have quite a mentionable cultural heritage connected to them. This is just one example of the very early introductions of media-related (be it public service or not) products to children.

⁴ In the official Danish measures of television-viewing, children aged three and up are included

hold of the phenomenon. Theoretically I build on the concepts of *situated learning* and *communities of practice* developed by Lave and Wenger (2001), understanding the child as a newcomer in the particular community of practice which media use in the family represents⁵. Without accepting this triangular relation between children, media and consumption as a fact, one cannot understand the media reality that children inherent nowadays. Public service or not; television viewing is not only related to entertainment or education, but also to consumption – seen from both a user and a producer perspective. Obviously, traditional spot commercials provide children with knowledge of products which one can buy or at least wish for, but also flow-TV as such as well as traditional programs and TV-narratives have as their primary function to advertise for program-related products, and can be said to work as a kind of exhibition for all the different kind of merchandise, events, other television programs and the televisions-stations themselves. Any cultural product or process nowadays are deeply related to other products and processes and are referring to and embedding each other in continuously ongoing flows.

Having this as a starting point raises the question of why, then, studies of this particular audience group have only to a very limited extend been conducted in the context of European empirical media studies. Up until now, almost no qualitative media-research has been made regarding children under five years old. This means, that there is no science-based answers to the discussion of whether or not it is good or bad for toddlers to watch television, video and commercials, and therefore no solid platform, from which one can take a critical stand.

4. Empirical approach

The study which forms the empirical basis of this article is conducted as a ethnographic participant observation study in seven Danish families, including eight children aged one and a half to three years old, their siblings and parents. The families live in different geographic areas of Denmark, they represent a wide range of social and educational backgrounds⁶ and they have quite different patterns of media uses. I visited each family six times; three times when the children were about 18-20 months old, and three times when they were about three years old. The visits took place during afternoon, evenings and weekend mornings, when the families watched TV⁷ and the children took part in this more or less actively. I used field notes (during and after the observations) and video-recordings as tools for data collection. These different methods all contributed to a broad registration of the

⁵ Later the child will join other, parallel communities of practice in school or among peers, but for the toddler family is the primary context of these activities.

⁶ In this study no families of different ethnic background participate. This is a pragmatic, not an epistemological choice, and I see interesting potentials in doing similar kinds of research in families with different cultural heritage.

⁷ I use the term «watching TV» to cover both broadcast television and DVD's/videos. This is primarily caused by the lack of distinction from the children, and by the fact that most of the films and series watched on DVD/video have or are been showed on TV.

different ways in which the children used television narratives and the merchandise or artifacts connected to those. Concretely I operationalized Marcus' approach by observing the children in front of the TV, in their bedrooms playing with toys or during meals in the family.

By applying this broader view on media-use it is my intention to be able to grasp and understand the meaning-making processes that take place, both in the actual reception situation as well as before and after. Supplementary I interviewed the parents in each family about the children's viewing habits, uses of different media and media-texts, and about the changes and developments regarding these issues in between my two visits. It is obvious, that children use and relate to media products in other spheres and arenas as well; kindergartens, nurseries, shopping malls, cultural institutions etc. Still the youngest viewers have their private home as a primary arena of media use, which is why this particular field has been chosen in this study.

I should be clear, that studies of non-verbal people – children or not – or people whose verbalizations one do not understand – requires specific methodological considerations and willingness to interpret non-verbal actions as carrying meaning. Since what I am interested in is meaning making and uses of different media texts by children, I must look for traces of such in their actions and interactions with their surroundings. As a theoretical stepping stone I apply a phenomenological approach, inspired by Merleau-Ponty and Scandinavian researchers who have applied his thoughts on the study of children and their ways of 'being as bodies in the world', Løkken (2005) and Hangaard-Rasmussen (1996). In the case of children and media use, the phenomenological approach can be used to describe and explain how children, through bodily perception and actions, make meaning of the world as they see and interpret it, including narratives and text which are presented to the children in different forms or modalities. Also, focusing on the body enables a different understanding of the social structures, in which the child takes part, since media use is often connected to bodily interactions between family members, sitting tight or cuddling in the sofa. This approach is combined with a theoretical view on the text as both virtual and physical representations of narratives and figures. As the child involved bodily with for instance merchandise, this adds layers of meaning to the reception of on-screen representations.

4.1 The role of the researcher

As an observer I myself was also often involved in these interactions, with children sitting on my lap or simply crawling all over me, which gave me the opportunity of registering for instance bodily tensions when watching exiting media content. I treat this as valid data, emphasizing the need to be physically present as an observer in studies of this kind.

Doing research in private homes, in people's leisure time and specifically pointed at a normally quite intimate family-situation such as television viewing, one has to consider ways of approaching and ways of acting during the observations. Especially when the aim is to look at children, and even make descriptions and evaluations of one's observations, a highly sensitive attitude is needed. These days, many people seem to have something to say about the ways children are brought up and what it requires to be a good parent and my subject of interest is definitely a parameter in these discussions. The number of books, magazines and television-shows dealing with topics like these are numerous, and in some way or another I have to place my self and my project in relation to these discourses – both theoretically but most certainly also quite concrete in my meeting with the families I use as informants. Therefore I have chosen a very open-minded way of introducing and talking about my project to my informants⁸, in trying to make them understand my task, and to feel as little intimidated as possible. For instance have I told the parents that I was *not* a psychologist and that I did not have any intentions as to evaluate their children in their interaction with media-texts, but that my interest concerned television viewing as a cultural phenomenon. Also, it was important for me – in my interactions with the families – to be unprejudiced, which meant that I talked about the things that interested them trying to avoid any judgments, whether verbal or unspoken.

When it comes to the children – whom I understand as my primary informants – I also have to consider my role in the interactions. Sociologist Bill Corsaro (2005) discusses the possibility of gaining participant status as an adult amongst children, which is for instance complicated by the simple fact that adults (researchers) are physically larger than children. Also, adults are usually seen as having power over children's activities. Therefore, full participation will always just be approximated. One of the ways Corsaro has tried to overcome this fact, has been through what he calls a reactive approach in entering children's worlds and spaces. He simply sat down, and waited for the children to come to him, and for instance start to ask him questions. This, I think, is a very suitable way to gain access to children's places, in the gentlest way. During the observations I also made a lot of effort in gaining acceptance from the children themselves, although obviously my explanations to them were simplified, such as: «I want to know what you like to watch on TV and what you like to play with» or «Can you show me your toys?»

Intervening in children's places requires a high degree of sensibility towards the roles one takes on as an observer. I believe that it is necessary to take on different roles according to the specific circumstances, but always with the purpose to see the world from a child's point of view – to the widest possible extend. The Danish anthropologist Eva Gulløv (1999) has described this as participation, but slightly

⁸ ... or more precisely in this case, the parents of my informants, who were the ones who give me access to their children.

different from the children's way of participating. Being and acting like an adult in one's approach to children also enables a trustful relationship between the child and the adult, whereas an attempt to act like a child might blur this, and give the child doubts about one's intentions and motives.

Since what I am interested in is interactions on different levels – between child and text, child and toy, child and adult – my own involvement in the processes taking place during my visits are also treated as such, as mentioned before. This means that I don't consider my own influence as source of error, but merely as one of more interactions taking place. At this point I am inspired by people like Pertti Alasuutari (1995) and the Swedish film-researcher Margareta Rönnerberg (1996), who both take their point of departure in the field of symbolic interactionism. Rönnerberg describes it as both a way of analyzing the processes taking place between a text and its viewer, but also as a way of grasping the relationship between the researcher and the informant, in the actual research-process. Basing my analysis on this provides me with tools to describe and understand the way data are created in the interaction-processes, in which I myself take part, instead of treating the phenomenon as something isolated.

5. Findings

All families in the study used TV and possessed TV-related merchandise, albeit at quite different levels. Some had decorated the child's bedroom with Disney characters; others had only a few dolls or figures related to shows from the public service Danish Broadcasting Cooperation (DR). In some families for example merchandised clothing was seen as any other clothing; in others it was specifically avoided. These choices were closely related to the parents' style and taste as such, and connected to lifestyle at an overall level. Briggs (2006) refers to Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen in his analysis of the 'toyified' clothes and interior decoration in the life of a toddler, understanding them as one example of how he (the study had his own son as a case) and his wife lived out the discursive expectations of 'the good parent' by buying these things. In my study I found much more dispersed strategies and conceptions of what being a good parent meant; for some of my informants' merchandised clothes were understood as quite the opposite, as something they would never buy. Instead some of them bought especially Danish clothes brands to underline their aesthetic taste, others took pride in not being 'a slave' to fashion or brands, and emphasized that children's clothing first and foremost should be practical.

During the one and a half year time span between my two visits in the seven families the children in all cases become regular viewers, with clear preferences, likes and dislikes. Some of them already watched TV on a regular basis at one and a half years old, others hardly paid the TV any attention, and could not be said to have systematic viewing patterns. In those cases, my primary aim during observations

was to figure out which particular text elements attracted their attention, even for the shortest time periods, since it is my purpose to describe the first meetings with visual narratives, not to judge whether or not they watched TV «properly», neither to judge what and how they understood of TV narratives. The before mentioned taste of the parents were clearly contributing to the development of a specific media matrix for each child. According to the before mentioned concepts of communities of practice this means, that the young child involves itself in a community of tastes and preferences, which is to a certain degree outlined to the child from birth, but which is also adjusted towards both the toddler and to other family members over time. The community is therefore both pre-defined and dynamic, and the toddler is therefore both an object to structures and at the same time an acteur in and towards them.

5.1 Children aged one and a half

The earliest experiences with media are random and are gradually incorporated in the child's everyday life with increasing attention paid to bits and pieces of texts and narratives. Meaning making is related to the body, as when a 18 month old boy looks at his belly, to see if there is a screen there just like the Teletubbies. In several cases, the social relationship with family members around the TV are more important than what is actually shown, yet some of the children at that age have clear preferences for particular programmes and shows. As a common pattern, the *narrative, visual or auditive elements* on which the one and a half year old children focus, are to a wide extend the same for all the children. Shifting scenes, jingles, music, particular noises (for instance a car driving or beeping or children's voices), characters entering or leaving the «stage», saying «hello» or «bye bye» and animals of different kinds – live, dolls or animated, are all elements to which all eight children pay attention. Their attention is attracted by *short narratives*, either inside particular programs (such as sequences of *Teletubbies*) or around programs, such as trailers before or after films or programs. These short narratives or advertisements (which I believe can be said to consist of narrative elements) in some way or another fits the cognitive schemata of toddlers, and they seem able to comprehend and make some kind of meaning of them.

Also, the short trailers or program-presentations often present either *figures or characteristics of particular genres, which are known to the children and which they enjoy to recognize*. This shows, that not only specific programs are important, but that the media-flow as such carries meaning, and that the recognition of characters and characteristics of genre travels through different modalities. Sound is an important matter in this regard; as a common feature; children's television programs and film are structured using sound as a primary defining component (see Johansen and Jørgensgaard-Graakjær (2007) for a further analysis of this matter).

The narrative and structural organization of a show like *Teletubbies* could be seen as supportive of viewing patterns like that, working with both very short narrative sequences as well as repetition as recurring elements, which leads to the assumption that the producers – since they claim to base the program concept on knowledge of toddler's cognitive abilities – has this as one of their premises. That it works is beyond doubt. Almost all the children in my study love or used to love the Teletubbies. There is reason to believe that this particular show for many – Danish as well as European – children represents the earliest experiences with television narratives. As a whole, the range of programs offered to young children are very similar in their aesthetic and narrative forms, many of them belonging to what I call «chewing gum-worlds» of pastel colors and organic shapes. In Johansen/Jørgensgaard Graakjaer (2007) also aesthetic – visual and auditive – similarities between commercials and program content are found and therefore the television offerings towards the youngest viewers must be said to be a lot of «more of the same». In a negative perspective this can be said to blur the distinction between commercials and not-commercials, and between different kinds of commercials (for instance spot-commercials vs. own-commercials/trailers). But seen from the child's point of view, the overlaps in modes of appearance also, at an early stage, support their development of knowledge of style, which they use for recognition of elements across genre. A 20 months old girl raised her hands and waved her body back and forth every time she saw just the slightest glimpse of the trailers for the upcoming Junior Song Contest on the Danish Broadcasting Company (DR). She clearly recognized the format, and connected it to her knowledge of the particular genre, and her knowledge of her older sisters singing and dancing performances in the living room, supported by either recorded music on CD's or a PlayStation game, where the player takes active part in performing in a music video. A boy aged one and a half did the same when he watched an advertisement for an upcoming concert-tour⁹, smiled and rocked his body to the music. He might not know why, but the music was clearly appealing to him.

5.2 Children aged three

At age three, the children have in many cases developed more *differentiated preferences*, and all of them have become more regular viewers. Typically they watch some (or more) TV everyday when they come home from kindergarten. Still they watch more DVD than actual broadcast TV, and in many cases the programs they watch are either supported by merchandise or support the child's interest

⁹ In Danish: Åh Abe koncerter, referring to a series of CD's with new recordings by a range of artists of traditional Danish children's songs, published by DR. The CD's are supplemented by song-books and VHS/DVD's with music videos. This concert-tour, presenting the winners from last years Junior Song Contest along with beloved characters from children's television, is another example of the way even a public service channel like DR are working consciously with brand-building, targeted at the youngest.

in specific subjects (dinosaurs, princesses, agricultural vehicles e.a.). In other words, TV is incorporated in children's everyday life as it is, as a both determining and structuring factor. One boy, aged three, loved dinosaurs and watched both fiction and documentary films of this subject. Also, his parents bought him figures and books, and took him to the library to find more. Lately they had also used the internet to gain information of prehistoric animals, just as they had visited an exhibition at a museum in Copenhagen although they lived several hundred kilometers away. The boy knew the names and characteristics of several dinosaurs, and he was able to pronounce their names correctly – in Latin. In this case, the active interplay between the boy and his parents resulted in a noticeable expansion of his particular interest to experiences of cognitive, bodily and social kind.

An example of this kind also proves the focus on *children's culture as consumer culture* to be reasonable. Just as everybody else in this country, at times of economic growth and affluence, children take part in the much debated 'consumption party'. Nurseries and living rooms are packed with all kinds of electronic equipment, hardware as well as software, toys, books, magazines and huge amounts of merchandise of all kinds. All these products are part of toddlers' everyday lives, and they use them for a number of different purposes and make emotional connections with them at various degrees. Some of the children have toys and other kinds of merchandise related to television programs they have not seen yet. Others do not, since their parents do not want them to have it until they ask for it themselves.

There seems to be a tendency, though, that the children must be quite *experienced and advanced viewers*, with severe knowledge of the characteristics of the different narratives and the figures related to them – how they sound, how they move and what role they play in the narrative – before they can make any visible connections between the television-text and the physical item. Only a few of the children made these connections at age one and a half, all of them did them repeatedly at age three.

6. Conclusion

In summary, TV plays an important role in the everyday lives of children aged one to three. Through TV, they achieve some initial experiences with narratives and they involve themselves with the characters and stories presented to them, using them to get a grip on the world they inhabit. That TV is the perhaps most important feature as to present children of today with contemporary consumer culture, is to me an inevitable fact. Perhaps even before they are born children are inscribed in this. One way or another all the families in this study dealt with this, although they put up very different strategies in managing with it. Some were quite restrictive, others were less, and the children in all families more or less copied the TV viewing patterns from their parents and older brothers and sisters, and thereby took on identities as media users, through their varied preferences

and patterns of use. During the 18 month period of the observations the children *«did media»* – understood as a both social and performative act – and thereby became media users. As Lave and Wenger (2001) stresses, becoming a member of a community of practice is not a matter of adapting habits, actions and structures, but of feeling part of the particular community, also by influencing these. In most families, TV was used to structure the rhythm of everyday life, mostly as a marker of transitions; coming home from kindergarten, getting ready for bed etc. Some parents expressed that their habits had been adjusted during the period – especially in those families, where the observed toddler was the oldest or the only child.

Toddlers can be said to involve themselves in *contemporary media culture*, and during the second and third year of their lives they become aware of many stylistic and narrative features of both programs and commercials, including different kind of trailers and internal advertising. It seems meaningful to say, that television – not least aimed at the youngest viewers – works as a window for exhibition of a wide range of products related to the programs and for building the before-mentioned brand-loyalty towards programs and channels. The before mentioned relative homogeneity in the offering of television programs, only strengthens this tendency.

For a small child, the world is grasped and understood physically and bodily. Watching TV is both as a cognitive and social phenomenon something the non-verbal child interprets via bodily emotions and reactions. This can be the case in a very concrete manner, like the boy who looked at his belly, and it can be a matter of using the viewing situation for bodily pleasure – either alone with a pacifier in one's mouth, or with parents and siblings watching family entertainment and sitting close.

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